

Throngs of Hawkeye faithful flood Eastern Iowa Airport

Most of Tuesday's travelers were on track to board and leave as scheduled



People wait to check in for Rose Bowl charter flights at the Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids on Tuesday, Dec. 29, 2015. (Stephen Mally/The Gazette)

Vanessa Miller

The Gazette

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Dec 29, 2015 at 4:43 pm

CEDAR RAPIDS — Instead of a red carpet, The Eastern Iowa Airport on Tuesday rolled out the artificial turf for the thousands of University of Iowa

faithful planning to fly west to watch their Hawkeyes compete in the Rose Bowl this week.

Throngs of black and gold-clad travelers packed the Cedar Rapids airport to check in for 13 charter flights leaving Tuesday, in addition to those booked on commercial flights and other travelers not headed to the Rose Bowl. A line for the only 747 charter headed to the game stretched from a far ticket counter to baggage claim two hours before it was scheduled to leave at 4 p.m., although no one seemed to mind.

“It’s going to be a big party,” said Tonya Trudo, 41, of Robins, about her expectations for the plane trip.

“It’s all Hawk fans,” said Trudo’s husband, Brent, 41. “I hope they have enough beer.”

A tailgate atmosphere permeated the airport Tuesday, with green turf flooring marked like a football field laid out near the charter check-in counter, a specialty bar stationed after security serving breakfast burritos and Bloody Marys, and a row of beer samples offered on the concourse.

Before security, hundreds of fans snapped photos under a large banner that read, “Road to Pasadena.” Once the more than 400 passengers booked on the 747 charter flight were checked in, they reclined — beer in hand — and chatted about their shared enthusiasm over the Hawkeyes and the Rose Bowl.

“It’s exciting,” said Brandie Gross, 32, of Amana. “It’s like a big party from the moment you get dropped at the door.”

[ho had plans derailed Monday due to weather](#) Unlike the many w across the region, all of Tuesday’s chartered travelers left on time — or close to it. Because hundreds spent hours in the airport on Monday trying to rebook or reroute their trips following cancellations and delays on commercial flights, some of Tuesday’s travelers said they were worried.

But Kaye Haskins, of Waterloo, wasn’t.

“Iowa knows how to handle these things,” she said. “We’ve been around the block.”

Kent Van Meter, 66, of Cedar Rapids, said he was anxiously watching the forecast and checking the flight status. He and his wife, Jacque Van

Meter, 65, were scheduled on one of the earlier charter flights out of the Cedar Rapids airport on Tuesday.

“We’ve talked about this all our lives,” he said, motioning to his wife.

As a girl, Jacque Van Meter would dress up in boots, throw her baton and pretend to march in the Tournament of Roses Parade. That’s why she and her husband snagged package deals to Pasadena, Calif. immediately after learning of the Hawkeyes’ postseason fate.

“It’s the Rose Bowl,” she said.

Officials said more than 3,000 Hawkeye fans bound for Pasadena, Calif., are scheduled to travel via charter out of The Eastern Iowa Airport this week, with Tuesday expected to be the busiest day.

And, although long lines of gleeful Hawkeye fans seemed to be moving smoothly through the charter check-in process, those on commercial flights Tuesday still experienced some hiccups. One flight to Denver was canceled, others were delayed, and at least one Pasadena-bound couple routed through Dallas on American Airlines had their tickets canceled due to weather issues in Texas.

“Then they automatically rebooked us for Jan. 1 at 5:50 p.m. — almost two hours after the game (will start),” said Gary Fisher, of Monticello.

The couple eventually finagled a Tuesday afternoon flight to Dallas and a Wednesday morning flight to Los Angeles — just in time to start enjoying some of the Hawkeye-related events they’ve already expensed.

“We’ve been season ticket holders for 35 years,” Fisher said, adding about his wife, “this was on her bucket list.”

Still, complaints seemed to be few amid the airport’s festive atmosphere, where “Go Hawks” seemed to be the standard parting phrase, replacing “goodbye.”

“We’re totally stoked,” said Kirk Schmidt, 44, of Cedar Rapids.

“We’re expecting a keg,” he said about the plane ride.

Schmidt and his wife, Heather Schmidt, 38, grabbed one of the Rose

Bowl package deals — including chartered flight, hotel arrangements, parade and game tickets — hours after learning of the Hawkeyes' bowl selection.

“It was a magical season, and we got swept up,” Kirk Schmidt said.